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Chinese Students Overseas and China's Modernization

Nobuyuki Kubota

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Preface

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping urged the Chinese to learn from other countries, declaring that one must learn from those who are most advanced before one can catch up with and surpass them....

Independence does not mean shutting the door on the world, nor does self-reliance mean blind opposition to everything foreign. Science and technology are part of the wealth created in common by all mankind. Every people or country should learn from the advanced science and technology of others.

Following on this call, the Ministry of Education launched a program of publicly funded study abroad for students and researchers in science, engineering, agriculture, medicine and other subjects useful to China's quest for modernization. This program has been called "by far the most important component of international educational exchange in terms of its sheer scale and the expenditures incurred, as well as its long-term implications for the development of China's education, science and culture, the national economy and

foreign diplomacy."

In the next six years, China, which had sent out fewer than 10,000 students between 1949 and 1966 and almost none in the succeeding decade, sent over 26,500 students and researchers abroad. Most were in the fields designated in 1978, with less than 14% in the humanities and social sciences. Another 8,000 went abroad, mainly to the United States, as privately funded students.[1] The rate of increase in government-funded students has continued high, bringing the total number of students sent out between 1987 and 1988 to 46,000. This has been overtaken, however, by the soaring numbers of private students. Five years ago, Japan took a few hundred private students from China; in 1988, Japan had 28,000 enrolled in short-term language courses.[2] This rate of increase—the result of relaxations in exit criteria by the PRC and in entry criteria by host countries—and the courses of study chosen are very far from the types of study envisaged in 1978. How far is China's pragmatic plan for overseas study on course, and what consequences—functional and dysfunctional, expected and unexpected—are emerging from its changing composition? The folowing paper will attempt to answer some of these questions.

Focus on Japan

The United States has the largest number of Chinese college students (besides 25,000 from the PRC in 1988 there were 26,000 from Taiwan and 10,600 from Hong Kong[3]), but the numbers involved and long history of educational exchanges between the two countries mean the U.S. contribution to China's modernization deserves a separate study.[4] I shall therefore concentrate on Japan and other developed countries as student destinations, as they bring into sharp focus the recent changes in number and type of students studying overseas.

The Results of Studying Abroad

A historical perspective may be helpful in considering the present increase in overseas study. Only once before has China experienced such a sudden and spontaneous outflow of students. This first wave of overseas students left the country in the 1900s, in quest of an elusive modernity which had been the subject of a number of false starts in their homeland. Most went to Japan, following the advice of the elder statesman Zhang Zhindong who saw in Japan the advantages of savings in fares, similarity of script, and a shortcut to the best in Western writings. Overall, Zhang felt, Japan's "circumstances and customs are close to ours and we can study it easily".[5]

Zhang had envisaged carefully selected, officially sponsored students undertaking approved courses under the eye of the Chinese consul, but the reality proved very different: the majority of enrolments came from private students, who went into short-term courses with little technical content. From a low base, student numbers increased at least twelve-fold in three years to more than 7,000 in 1960.[6] Given that so many were doing short-term courses, it seems possible that some twenty thousand managed a period of study in Japan in the last years of the Qing.

The results of this intense activity are hard to assess. The technological attainments of most of these students would have been negligible, making them useless in the self strengtheners' projected mines, mints and shipyards. They tended to gravitate to teacher training, readily finding employment, on their return, in China's expanding education system. A recent favorable summing-up finds that they thus hastened the modernization of elementary and secondary schooling and provided a leadership cadre in higher education whose influence persisted into the 1910s and 1920s;[7] that is, what vocational training they did obtain was put to good use.

Their constructive input into the new order was matched by their

destructive effect on the old ; as possessors of modern learning, however exiguous, they qualified as "future masters" of China (未来之主人翁), and wittingly or unwittingly participated in the breaking down of the imperial social order. Under the discarded examination system, the state had strictly controlled entrance to the elite; now it had to abandon its role as legitimiser of knowledge and see displaced the Confucian scholars who had manned the gateways to learning and office. Many students played a more direct role in the downfall of the Qing, organizing and publishing in Tokyo with a freedom impossible in China and returning to spread revolution through the schools they taught in. This combination of revolution and education seems more at home within China today than outside it, and it appears unlikely that today's overseas students will be tomorrow's revolutionary leaders; the issue of sponsored mobility as opposed to contested mobility, however, remains significant in China today.

Later student outflows provide other perspectives on the present. The "Diligent work and Frugal Study" movement, which saw about 2,000 students studying in France in 1920, has obvious parallels with the present situation, and indeed today's students use the phrase "qingong jianxue 勤工倹学" to describe their own practice of working to support their study. There are, however, some differences. Whereas today's students work because they have to, many leaders of the earlier movement believed in the redemptive value of manual labor for its own sake, as a form of education in itself (a belief sorely tried by the actual experience of factory work)[8]. Similarities may perhaps be seen in "the extraordinary Chinese enthusiasm for study abroad and an absence of proper planning" which left many students close to starvation when the labor market in France collapsed in late 1920[9]. The movement wound up with voluntary return or deportation of most students, and must be considered an isolated

and rather unsuccessful experiment. The democratic impulse behind it found rural China a more fruitful field of activity than France, leaving study in the West to become identified with elite status.

The Elitist View

In Republican China, the most prestigious destination for overseas study was the U.S., the destination of around 22,000 students between 1912 and 1949.[10] American education was education for the elite, in terms of both the social origins of students and their future careers. To an urban, upper-class home background students added an education which impinged at few points on the urgent political and economic concerns of China ; when this was combined, as it often was, with an unqualified enthusiasm for the Western model, it made returned students a ready target for radical or liberal critism. Overseas education, critics felt, alienated its recipients from their fellow Chinese and gave them visions too grandiose for China's current stage of development. In one writer's eloquent words, "while educationalists have already introduced the latest methods from Europe and America, the masses, as of old, stand outside the circle of education .... Our whole culture has lost touch with ordinary people ; in the sky there are planes flying about and on the ground, as of old, one-wheeled carts still struggle in the mud."[11] The elite nature of study in the U.S. accentuated the ambivalence of Chinese attitudes toward foreign borrowing. For political reasons, the program's shortcomings were emphasized after 1949 while its achievements, such as the training of a number of brilliant scientists, were overlooked. Deng's 1978 statement can be read as a refutation of criticism of this nature and as an attempt to reclaim advanced study as a vital stepping stone toward China's modernization.

Early PRC Period

The establishment of the People's Republic saw a new phase in the history of China's experimentation with foreign models, and the only one wholly under government control. Soviet influence was considerable in the first decade, particularly in the restructuring of the higher education system and in the position occupied by Russian in the curriculum, and study abroad was almost entirely confined to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Most of the 9,535 students sent were undergraduates. Tentative experiments with European destinations followed in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, until all foreign models were repudiated during the Cultural Revolution.[12)]

New Policies at Home and in Japan

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, 1978 saw a new start in opening China to outside sources of learning. The overseas student policy enunciated then was reaffirmed in 1986, when the interim provisions on study abroad took effect. These attempted to strengthen the government's control over sponsored students ; at the same time, restrictions on private study abroad were relaxed. This coincided in Japan—one of the earlier destinations for Chinese students—with a deliberate attempt to increase the intake of foreign students. The background to this decision is discussed in the following pages.

Previous Western Views of Accepting Foreign Students

Until a few years ago, acceptance of third-world students tended to be regarded in the British Commonwealth countries as a form of aid. (The situation in the U.S., both for native and overseas students, is rather different: higher education is more often in private hands, and the general philosophy is one of "user pay").

Even where well-to-do students could pay their own way they were seen as benefiting from a highly developed educational infrastructure which their own country, it was implied, could not afford.

Who Pays?

The view that taking overseas students was a form of direct or indirect aid rested on two assumptions: one, that the recipient country could afford to provide for outsiders as well as its own citizens ; two, that it was making available advanced and expensive facilities.

In recent years, both assumptions have been questioned and in some areas reversed. Western economies are seen as more precariously balanced than before, with industries and markets threatened by decline and competition. The government has all it can do to provide sufficient resources for its own students, without giving away scarce resources to noncitizens. Education is now a commodity ; and as with other commodities, the larger the market, the better.

As students have moved from being beneficiaries to customers, so the type of courses being offered has changed, with the private sector playing a far larger role (a departure for countries where post-school education has traditionally been publicly funded).

The situation in Japan is somewhat defferent from that of other countries, in that Japan has an indubitably robust economy. The amount allotted to aid recently doubled in foreign exchange terms because of the high yen. Internationalization has become a vogue word, and in pursuit of this goal Prime Minister Nakasone, called on Japan to accept 100, 000 overseas students by the year 2, 000. The Japanese government, however, does not have an interventionist tradition, and relatively few of those now studying in Japan are here on government scholarships.[13] Some receive aid from private founda-

tions or the universities they attend, but the vast majority are fee-paying students enrolled in privately run language courses. Over 320 Japanese language schools now cater to some 35,000 students from Asia, including 28,000 from the PRC.[14]

Cultural Conflicts

Despite the lack of government involvement and the similarities at the microlevel with conditions in Australia, the debate on overseas students in Japan is still couched in terms of wealthier Japan assisting poorer neighbors. Japan does not seek out fee-paying students, but has acquired them inadvertently as a by-product of its economic might. The question of foreign students in Japan is related to the question of foreign unskilled labor (at present illegal but widespread, with an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 workers). At issue is the degree to which Japan owes assistance to the Asia region versus the maintenance of homogeneity and conformity in Japan.

Japan is an exceptionally safe society, and it is common to walk on the streets carrying hundreds or thousands of dollars; indigent foreigners are suspected of taking advantage of this trait.[15] Other breaches in etiquette are made by students who rent a room for one and then move three in, who do not show up for work, or who claim support as a right from their sponsors.[16] The mere possibility of linguistic and cultural misunderstandings appears to deter many Japanese from renting rooms to foreigners or forming social contacts with them ; this is especially so when the foreigners are from Third World countries. The harvest of goodwill implicit in the concept of education as aid does not appear to be reaped in Japan; indeed, one survey show that the longer overseas students stay in Japan the less they like the Japanese.[17]

Who Are These Students?

What kind of return can China expect for her current substantial outlay of public and private funds?

Before we can discuss the potential contribution of overseas students to the PRC's development, it is neccesary to see who these students are. We need to know their numbers and fields of study, their experiences abroad, and perhaps even more importantly their motives and their plans for the future. Ideally, these questions would be the subject of a comprehensive survey; in its absence, one must put together a picture from students' own writings and surveys of the foreign student community generally.

General Breakdown

In Japan, one finds unprecedented numbers of Chinese students from both Taiwan and the mainland. Japan divides its student intake into "overseas students" (留学生 ryugakusei, those going its college) and "students attending school" (就学生 shugakusei, those attending vocational or language schools). Figures for mid-1987 show that there were then 5,661 mainland and 5,317 Taiwan students in the former category, forming half the total number of overseas college students; these figures had risen from a mere handful in the early 1980s.

It is in the second category, however, that the increase has been most startling. The number of students from the mainland has increased nearly a hundredfold in five years, to 28,256 in 1988 or 80% of the total (students from Taiwan tend not to show up in these figures, as they find it easier to come to Japan on a tourist visa). The majority appear to come from or through Shanghai; the Japanese consulate in Shanghai processed 24,838 entry visas between January and September 1988, compared to total of 11,949 for the previous year. In the first half of 1988, Shanghai's Public Security Office is said to have handled 40,000 applications for passports, of

which over 80% were for people planning to go to Japan.[18]

Sources of Funds

China is a developing country in which private wealth is not readily accumulated and foreign exchange is not accessible to ordinary citizens. Where does all the money for this massive student exodus come from? According to a Beijing source, there are four main sources of funds for private students : support from overseas friends and relatives, loans to be repaid once the student starts working overseas, mobilization of family resources (which may include selling everything of value the family owns), and private business or black market dealings.[19]

This sum may not appear excessively high to bureaucrats in the host country but it is equivalent to a year or two of family income in China. In these circumstances, it is little wonder that students desperate about the fate of their investment demonstrated in front of the Japanese consulate in Shanghai in 1988, or that those left stranded when the Japanese government closed substandard language schools are bitter about their treatment.[20]

No figures on the age or sex of the Chinese students are available, but a Tokyo Metropolitan government survey of foreign students in general (54% ryugakusei, 46% shugakusei) showed an average age of 27, with about one-third married.[21] The shugakusei in particular come from varied backgrounds; most have worked for several years, and their numbers include factory workers, cadres, teachers, doctors, performers, scientific and technical workers, managers and even soldiers and peasants. The average age is thirty or thereabouts.[22] Their motives for coming to Japan vary, but work is the primary purpose of many drawn by the high yen.

Shugakusei soon find out that the streets of Tokyo are not paved with gold ; all their resilience and stamina are needed for making a

living. Their best prospect is to find work as interpreters or translators, but this is difficult without a good knowledge of Japanese. Most work in service industries, where jobs are plentiful but poorly paid and where Japanese part-timers are the employer's first choice.

A smaller number (a quarter of working foreign shugakusei according to the Tokyo survey) find work in the construction industry, in heavy labor jobs already forsaken by most Japanese. Almost all work longer than the twenty hours a week permitted by the Japanese government; an income of 100,000 yen a month sounds good in yuan, but disappears quickly on high housing costs—23,000 ~30,000 yen for a small shared room—school fees of around 33,000 yen, transportation costs, and food.

Students often pay for a nest-egg with their health. One newspaper gives the schedule of 38-year-old Student A, from Shanghai: six days a week, he works from 11 p.m. at night to seven the next morning at a fast food factory for 800 yen an hour, then continues on to his Japanese course at 9 a.m. The afternoons are for sleeping; in his holidays, he plans to take a morning job with a cleaning company. Out of his regular earnings of 140,000 yen a month, he saves 40,000 yen; he has already accumulated 400,000 yen.[23]

Another student forsook study altogether and took on three jobs: a cleaning job from 7:30 to 10:30 a.m., work at a Japanese restaurant from 11:00 to 2:00, followed by a job at a Western restaurant until 10:00 p.m.[24] A slogan current among such students runs, "two years of hardship, happiness forever (辛苦両年, 幸福永年)": their aim is to save two million yen over their two-year stay in Japan.

Succesive Chinese governments have seen overseas students as neutral agents of technological transfer, vessels for the transmission of skills which will function in their new settings identically with

their old. Each in its turn, from the Qing to the People's Republic, has found that students' own motives and ambitions, and the interaction of these with established patterns in China, have been powerful determinations of the net effect of students studing overseas.

Post-return Placement

The role returned students will play is difficult to assess for two reasons : firstly, the outflow is so recent that most are still abroad; secondly, it appears likely that may younger people have no intention of returning, and will make their contributions as "overseas Chinese" rather than as citizens of the People's Republic.[25]

The highest direct return will be from publicly funded students, who are doing mainly postgraduate study in areas designated as significant for China's modernization. Overseas they have access to a profusion of facilities and information lacking in most Chinese institutions of higher education and research (with the exception of a few strategic fields). This access is likely to be considerably reduced on their return, and many worry over whether the units to which they are assigned can utilize their speciality and provide facilities for them to continue their research.

Their most valuable acquisition overseas, and one independent of technical facilities, will in many cases be skills and methodology (especially if they have studied in the West; Japanese tertiary study still tends to rely on rote learning and professorial authority[26]); but given China's relatively rigid academic structure, these may not be able to be disseminated widely on their return.

Private overseas students are somewhat better off, being asked to state job preferences and being able to reject uncongenial offers. 1987 interviews with returnees who had studied privately overseas show that almost all were happy with their treatment. They had responsible positions in their work units, and their problems were

those endemic to life in China—allocation of housing, reunion with a spouse working elsewhere—rather than being connected with their overseas experience.[27] One should recall, however, that they represent those willing to return; they have undoubtedly left counterparts overseas who were skeptical about China's ability to accommodate their speciality.

When he visited Japan in 1986, the deputy head of the State Education Commission assured his student audience that students sent by the government would receive every consideration on their return to China. Their work allocation would be made taking into account both their personal preferences and the country's needs, and, if it did not utilize their skills, would be adjusted by the Education Commission. There would be no repeat of the randomness of the Cultural Revolution, when students who had studied Spanish were sent to dental clinics because of the coincidental appearance of the ideograph 牙 in the Chinese for both "Spanish" and "dental".[28]

Notwithstanding these reassurances, however, and the personal satisfactions to be gained by working in China, it is clear that modern returned students cannot aspire to the status of those who graduated from foreign universities fifty or sixty years ago. The ultimate dominance of political over academic considerations, the number of university and postgraduate students being trained in China itself, and the generally disconsolated position of intellectuals in a rapidly commercializing economy all combine to render their position relatively powerless.

Those Less Hopeful

If this is the case for university graduates, how much less enviable is the future for the shugakusei or graduates of short-term English courses who return with no recognised qualifications. A few may be able to take students in English or Japanese, but for

most the benefits of overseas study will lie not in the knowledge but in the wealth they amassed. In view of the uncertain status and limited economic and professional opportunities awaiting them, it is not surprising that many students choose to remain overseas.

Three Main Types of Aspirations

One observer analyzes Chinese (mainland and Taiwanese) students in Japan into three groups. First, there are those who wish to remain in Japan, either to pursue higher studies or seek work in Japanese companies. A substantial second group intends to return home ; among mainland students, this includes a number who came to Japan simply to earn money. Finally, a third group wishes to use Japan as a staging point on the way to third countries, usually Canada, Australia, and America.[29]

High Non-return Rates

The case of students who go to the United States does not offer encouraging precedents for those who expect overseas students to lend their talents directly to their country. Chinese students from Taiwan, who can expect a higher living standard on their return home than their counterparts on the mainland, generally remain in America; figures show a return rate of 20% or less.[30]

Indirect Contributions

Even if one grants that a large percentage of PRC students abroad will seek to remain there, this may not nullify their contribution to China's development. One observer feels that "given the ready access to sophisticated telecommunication, rapid transportation and the easy exchange of ideas and knowledge, the discoveries made in the united States... can be easily transmitted and distributed to China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. In other words, intllectual

migration of Chinese... should be considered China's contribution to the world and China's investment in her own future development". The writer cites the example of Taiwan, which has been able to lure back prominent Chinese-Americans to its high-tech research projects.[31]

Another possible avenue of indirect support is investment and joint ventures. Ealier generations of emigrants built up business in the recipient countries, especially in Southeast Asia; it remains to be seen whether the current outflow will follow this pattern, or concentrate in the professional areas which have typified secondary Chinese migration to other countries. Even if large-scale capital investment is an uncertain prospect, China should certainly gain from remittances and other forms of support extended by successful emigrants to relatives at home—including, one surmises, assistance with study overseas.

Fluctuations in Acceptance of Returnee Contributions

I have already indicated that those students who do return home do not appear to enjoy outstanding social status or financial rewards.

This may be a deterrent to return, but should in itself protect those who do go back from those rapid swings in attitudes toward foreign borrowings which have characterised China over the post decades. In this connection, the frequency of work-study may be another defense against possible changes of elitism.

Expansion of Education at Home

Overall, the role of overseas study in China's development has been transformed in the past decade. Students returned from Japan in the late Qing had the field of modern learning almost to themselves; those who returned from abroad during the Republican period represented nearly a seventh of all those with tertiary

education in China.

Nowadays, however great the number of those abroad may become, they represent only a tiny fraction of those being trained in China; and however esoteric their specialities may appear, they are unlikely to reflect as wide a gap as existed between the airplane and the ox-cart fifty years ago. These changes indicate the likelihood of a relatively smooth absorption of the foreign knowledge gained through overseas study ; whether it achieves maximum utilization must depend on changes occuring within China's administrative, economic and political structures.

Notes

1) This summary of developments is based on Hong Shiqi, "Contemporary Education Relation with the Industrialized World : a Chinese View," in Ruth Hayhoe and Marianne Bastid, ed., *China's Education and the Industrialized World* (New York : M.E. Sharpe, 1987), pp. 228 -29.
2) *Austrade Export Development Progran for Education and Training Services*, Annual Report 1988, Asahi Shinbun 朝日新聞, I May 1989, p. 10.
3) Institute of International Education, *Annual Report*, 1987-88.
4) For a preliminary study, see David M. Lampton, *A Relationship Restored*. L. Ling-chi Wang, "Postwar Chinese Intellectual Contribution to the U.S. and the Contribution of Chinese Americans in Science and Technology" (paper delivered at Xiamen on Chinese Abroad, April 1989) devotes several pages to Chinese overseas students in the U.S.
5) Zhang Zhidong *Quauxue Pian*, in *Zhang Wenxiang gong quanji* (Taipei : Wenhai chubanshe, 1963), 203 : 7a.
6) Abe Hiroshi, "Borrowing from Japan : China's First Modern Educational System," Hayhoe and Bastid, *China's Educatin and the Industialized World*, p. 75. This figure replaces earlier estimates of 15,000 -17,000.
7) Tian Zhengping, "Liuxuesheng paiqian yu Zhongguo jindai jiaoyu,"

Jiaoyu yu yanjiu (田正平, 留学生派遣与中国近代教育, 教育与研究), 5 May 1988 pp. 75-80.

8) See Paul Bailey, "The Chinese Work-Study Movement in France," China Quarterly, 115, September 1988, pp. 441-61.

9) Y.C. Wang, *Chinese Intellectuals and the West, 1872-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966) p. 108. The dangers of predicating study on a false expectation of employment are relevant to today's surge of worker-students.

10) Ibid., p. 167.

11) Lao Xiang, "Guanyu Kang-Ri *Sanzi jing*, *Kangzhan wenyi* 1938 1 : 7.

12) See R.F. Price, "Convergence or Copying : China and Soviet Union (pp. 158-83) and Leo A. Orleans, Soviet Influence on China's Higher Education (pp. 184-98) in Hayhoe and Bastid, *China's Education and the Industrialized World.*

13) The Japanese Ministry of Education offers five hundred scholarships for PRC students, awarded through the Chinese government (Zhongguo *liuxuesheng tongxun* 中国留学生通訊 10, May 1986). *Liuxuesheng xinwen* 留学生新聞, a recently founded monthly paper catering to the Chinese student population in Japan, in its December 1989 issue lists a slightly larger number of scholarships for which Chinese students can compete.

14) *Asahi Shinbun*, 1 May 1989.

15) Needless to say, this suspicion is usually groundless, but occasional press reports of pickpocketing by a Chinese student fuel these fears. Another lucrative descent into the under world is made by those young women who work as bar girls or prostitutes. So far, those involved in this occupation appear to be mainly Filipinas.

16) Ribenren zuotan liuxuesheng wenti 日本人座談留学生問題, *Liuxuesheng xinwen*, 2 Jamuary 1989.

17) Results of a survey by Professor Sumiko Iwao of Keio University reported in the *Japan Times*, 2 April 1989.

18) Liuxuesheng xianzhuang 留学生現状, *Liuxuetheng xinwen*, I December 1988.

19) Personal communication.

20) See series of articles in *Guangming ribao* 光明日報 about Chinese students in Japan, especially 2 December 1988, "Xingxing sese de

Riyu xuexiao 形形色色的日語学校," and *Asahi Shinbun*, 危ない日本語学校, 日本人自身の問題, 1 May 1989.

21) *Japan Times*, 24 May 1989.

22) Lu Ming 陸明, "Zhongguo dalu jiuxuesheng pouxi 中国大陸就学生剖析," Liuxueshemg xinwen, 4 March 1989.

23) *Yomiuri Shinbun* 読売新聞, 12 January 1989. A fierce attack on the exploitation of Chinese students in Japan is contained in the Duzhe yuandi 読売園地 Section of *Liuxuesheng xinwen*, 4 March 1989.

24) Chang Kai 常愷, "Fengyu nanmei lu 風雨南美路," *Liuxuesheng xinwen*, 6 May 1989.

25) Early 1987 figures show 16,500 returned students. See Lin Lu, "It's not easy going home", Hong Kong *Standard*, 10 April 1987. 90% of publicly funded students apparently return (*Mainichi Shinbun* 毎日新聞, 26 November 1988).

26) Many graduate students suffer from "intellectual culture shock" when exposed to the Western insistence on independence and a critical approach to authority, See Brigid Ballard, "Academic Adjustment: the Other Side of the Export Dollar," paper presented at ANZCIES Conference, Brisbane, 1986.

27) Hong Kong *Standard*, 10 April 1987.

28) *Zhongguo liuxuesheng tongxun*, 10 May 1986.

29) "Liuxuesheng xianzhuang," op. cit.

30) L. Ling-chi Wang, "Postwar Chinese Intellecrual Contribution," p. 9.

31) Ibid., p. 20.

(本学教授・くぼたのぶゆき)